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Commission puts nonprofit group in control of Miami Marine Stadium redevelopment plan

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The Miami Herald

By a 4-1 vote, Miami commissioners agreed Thursday to give a nonprofit group seeking to save the iconic but long-shuttered Miami Marine Stadium control over the full surrounding site, including parking lots, so they can develop a plan to renovate, expand and re-open the facility.

Friends of the Miami Marine Stadium got a substantial boost from singer Gloria Estefan, who spoke to commissioners via pre-recorded video in support of the group's efforts to save what she called "this jewel in our midst."

Estefan also provided some key legal testimony that seemed to help persuade one wavering commissioner, Francis Suarez, to vote in favor. She cited the 1963 deed that underpinned creation of the stadium from a land donation by the Matheson family, arguing that it requires the entire site to be dedicated solely to supporting stadium operations.

"This is not a controversial vote today," Suarez said. "We're just doing what the deed already says."

Elated leaders of the group said the vote now allows them to start raising millions of dollars to renovate the deteriorated Virginia Key stadium, regarded as an architectural and engineering treasure, and reopen it as a public park and venue for concerts, rowing regattas, triathlons and community events.

The plan would include some small-scale development, including a marine exhibition center and restaurants, to support the stadium's operation. About 12 acres of the 22-acre site would be converted into a green waterfront park under the plan.

The detailed operational and development plan would still have to come back to the commission for approval, Friends co-founder Jorge Hernandez told the commission. Hernandez stressed the group will not seek city funding or subsidies.

Commissioner Frank Carollo, the lone dissenting vote, said he believed the proposal should go to a public referendum even as he praised the group for doing "one heck of a job" in developing a plan to save the stadium.

Commissioner Michelle Spence-Jones, who had previously voted against a separate agreement allowing the group to move forward with its plan, said she was reassured by the establishment of an escrow account at the National Trust for Historic Preservation to

handle money raised by the group for the project.

Friends has secured \$10 million so far, including \$3 million from a county preservation fund, and now has two years to raise the balance of the estimated \$30 million it will take to renovate the stadium. Members of the Miami-Dade legislative delegation delivered a letter to the commission Thursday pledging to seek between \$500,000 and \$1.5 million in state funding for the stadium next year.

The group was launched five years ago to save the stadium, which the city closed down after it was damaged by Hurricane Andrew in 1992 and intended to demolish for redevelopment.

Friends leaders persuaded the city to designate the stadium, which engineering studies determined remains fundamentally sound, as a protected historic site, and developed a plan to resuscitate it.

To bypass competitive bids required under rules for leases of public waterfront property, the city designated the semi-autonomous Sports and Exhibition Authority as the stadium's landlord. That has prompted complaints of a giveaway of public land from some activists, though Friends leaders say the city charters allows exemptions to public bidding requirements for nonprofit groups providing waterfront access.

Estefan and other supporters noted that in the 20 years the stadium has been closed, no other group has stepped forward with a feasible plan to save it.

"Today we right a wrong that has been there 20 years," Mayor Tomás Regalado, who has made saving the stadium a centerpiece of his administration, told commissioners after the vote.

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